

ABSTRACT

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THEATRE WORKS' THE LEGEND OF
WHITE SNAKE

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This thesis examines Chinese Theatre Work's The Legend of White Snake as a case study of intercultural performance. As an overseas non-profit organization in NYC, CTW creates production aims to "transform" to intercultural performance that "bridges Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics and forms" and also shows "aspects of the contemporary Chinese experience from slowly changing roles." Attempting to achieve these goals, CTW created hybrid Kun opera production that featured English narration, shadow puppetry, and intercultural casting. Utilizing Schechner's theory of multiculturalism, fusion, and interculturalism with Pavis and Lo and Gilbert's model to analyzing CTW's performance, this thesis examines both "the story" and "the telling" parts and unveils an imbalance between their Chinese and American source cultures and the unexpected result of their "functional transformation."

TRANSFORMATION IN CHINESE THEATRE WORKS' THE LEGEND OF
WHITE SNAKE

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Kun opera is one of the oldest performing art forms in China. The history of Kun opera can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), from the Chinese province Suzhou. Kun opera developed from a local tune and gradually became an orthodox performance genre as a result of the preference and advocacy of Chinese intellectuals. However, Kun opera lost its popularity among the masses after it became a high art. Currently, Kun opera faces the same plight as other traditional Chinese operas (such as Peking opera or Henan opera) as it strives to find a way to increase its popularity among younger generations.

Chinese Theatre Works (CTW), an overseas Kun opera company in the United States, tries to create new and hybrid performances to keep Kun opera “alive” by arousing their audience’s interest in Chinese cultural traditions.¹ To do so, they create hybrid Kun opera performances by using the traditional performance styles and setting conventions of Kun opera as well as the incorporation of shadow puppetry theatre.² By creating this kind of hybrid performance, CTW hopes to bridge cultural boundaries and aesthetic standards.

As a Taiwanese theatre and performance studies scholar who has studied under the direction of CTW’s artistic director, Kung-Yu Fong, I am particularly interested in examining the work and goals of Chinese Theatre Works. While studying for my Masters Degree at the University of Maryland, College Park in the spring of 2009 I

¹ Kung-Yu Fong, interview by author, 30 December 2009, Queens, NY, tape recording.

² The “shadow puppetry” of Kun opera refers to two kinds of shadow puppetry: one is the traditional shadow puppetry that people usually recognize, and the other kind is CTW’s creation. The traditional kind is when the puppeteers manipulate shadow figures and cast shadows on screen. The one that CTW creates is similar to animation in that it uses a series of plates that cast shadows on a screen.

was enrolled in “Chinese Theatre and Culture,” a class taught by Kung-Yu Fong, for one semester and then later served as a puppeteer in both the University of Maryland and Pace University productions of *The Legend of White Snake*.

When I began working with Chinese Theatre Works on *The Legend of White Snake* I was curious to see how people from different cultural backgrounds worked together and—since I had always understood that shadow puppetry manipulation is a very time-consuming practice to master—I was excited to learn how to manipulate shadow puppetry in a very short period of time. I soon learned that despite the fact that CTW promoted their work as featuring Chinese cultural traditions and “contemporary American puppetry,” their productions consisted of a number of various and disparate elements. I began questioning the efficacy of the work, especially in relation to the theatre company’s stated goals. My experience with *The Legend of White Snake*—as both a participant and observer—led to my decision to focus on CTW’s production and for my Master’s thesis. My research materials not only include CTW’s play scripts and productions, but also my scholarly observations, interviews with Fong and Stephen Kaplin, access to CTW’s private archive, as well as scholarly material on the history and development of Kun opera and intercultural theatre.

In this thesis, I will examine one of Chinese Theatre Work’s major hybrid productions, *The Legend of White Snake*, written and directed by their artistic director, Kung-Yu Fong. Utilizing *The Legend of White Snake* as a case study addresses my major question: according to CTW’s statement that they intend to “bridge Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics and forms” and aim to “spark the

interest in Chinese cultural traditions,"³ what Chinese cultural traditions does CTW use and what kind of intercultural performance do they create? In order to answer this major question, there are other questions I need to explore. Since Kun opera is performed in a traditional storytelling style, I will explore it from both the "story" and the "telling" parts. In doing so, this thesis will examine how and what CTW transforms according to their ideals. The "story" part proposes an interpretation of the traditional White Snake folk tale and juxtaposes it against CTW's version. The "telling" part of this thesis focuses on the adapters' perspectives, the hybrid forms, and the performer resource management associated with CTW's production of *The Legend of White Snake*.

Considering both the difficulty of Kun opera performance conventions, as well as CTW's attempt to subvert gender roles, when Chinese Theatre Works chooses to perform the White Snake folk tale, what does their own version of *The Legend of White Snake* display as "Chinese culture"? How does their choice reflect the dilemma between presenting the "original" story and the "audience-oriented" adjustments? Lastly, given the queries above, is CTW successful in achieving their goals? Does CTW's project of *The Legend of White Snake* actualize the "bridge" they purportedly want to create? Is their transformation successful?

³ "A Brief History...." Chinese Theatre Works. <http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/> (accessed June 9, 2010).

History of Kun opera in China

Kun opera developed during the Ming Dynasty (1368 -1644) from popular theatre.⁴ Scholars, such as E-Ting Lu, mention in *清代戲劇與崑曲 (The Qing Theatre and Kun opera)* that Kun opera originated from nanxi (Lu 2005, 50),⁵ an early form of drama closer to popular taste, which was set to folk songs and local ballads (Zhou 2002, 61).⁶ When the form came to Su Zhou, a city in the Province Jiangsu, it changed and integrated with Su Zhou local music and then gradually became a new music style, “Kun qiang.” Kun qiang is different from other rustic folk music because it is softer and more ornate than nanxi. It is said that Liang-Fu Wei (1489-1566) created Kun qiang, but this remains questionable.⁷ Kun qiang originated from local tunes, so at first it was not as soft and ornamental as it would later develop. Rather than identifying Wei as the creator of Kun qiang, scholars tend to regard him as one of the most important innovators. Zhou also indicates another important figure in the history of Kun opera, Chen-Yu Liang (1521-1549). Liang composed a new opera *Washing Silk Tale*, in which his lyrics were set to Kun qiang. In accordance with the soft and ornamental music, Liang’s writing style is also very elegant, and even the dialogues in the play are carefully versed. This new opera style soon became enormously popular as described “in Su Zhou Province, when people came out to

⁴ Different from western theatre, all traditional Chinese theatre is opera style, no matter popular or elite.

⁵ E-Ting Lu, *清代戲劇與崑曲 The Qing Theatre and Kun opera* (Taipei: 國家出版社, 2005), 50.

⁶ Qing Zhou, *蘇州崑曲 The Su Zhou Province Kun opera* (Taipei: 國家出版社, 2002), 61.

⁷ Scholar Yi-Bai Zhou Scholar points out the other possibilities in his book *中國戲劇發展史 (History of Chinese Drama)* that Wei could learn from a mentor because “...when he learned something new he went to ask Guo [過雲適 Yun-Shi Guo] for advice, and he would not leave until Guo regarded he sang well” (p.383). In that case, Wei was not the creator of Kun qiang but could be an innovator of Kun qiang. Yi-Bai Zhou, *中國戲劇發展史 History of Chinese Drama* (Taipei: Xue Yi Publishing, 1977), 383.

play, they all competed to sing Liang's lyrics."⁸ The success of *Washing Silk Tale* encouraged other literati⁹ to devote their time and effort to compose new play scripts. Writing Kun opera scripts was a trend for literati at that time. Thus, Kun opera became even more prosperous and was recognized by the literati as the only orthodox music style for opera. The other music styles were considered out of taste.

Kun opera started to decline during the eighteenth century. The overly decorated lyrics were unsuitable for stage performance like closet drama and the highly literate works were inaccessible to a general audience. The Kun opera started to lose the mass audience in popular theatres. Though Kun opera was still considered the only orthodox form of Chinese opera after the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) was established, the masses lost interest in Kun opera and were attracted by local tunes or operas developed from Kun opera, such as the Peking opera. Given these circumstances, the decline of Kun opera was inevitable.

From the time after the Qing Dynasty and Republic of China (1912-present) was established to the present day, Kun opera lost even more popularity after Chinese theatre started to be influenced by western concepts and aesthetics of theatre. Because the cultural forces were so strong, the westernized theatre became known as "modern" theatre.¹⁰ The western concept of theatre is dominant among younger

⁸The original text is 「吳閻白面冷遊兒，爭唱梁郎雪艷詞」。

⁹ During the imperial periods, the literacy in China was low. The social ranking propelled all the people who could read to take the Imperial Exam. Most people took the exam in order to become a government official and climb the social ranking. Only a very small group of people chose not to become a government official after taking the exam, but once they completed it and passed a certain standard, they were entitled to a different social ranking. During that time, most of the Chinese writers were government officials and vice versa. The Chinese usually refer to this social ranking as "government officials" or "literati." These people played the role in leading the trend and deciding the distinguishing characteristics of literature for each period of time. Yi-Bai Zhou, *中國戲劇發展史 History of Chinese Drama* (Taipei: Xue Yi Publishing, 1977), 419.

¹⁰ The term was first used during the early period of Republic of China. Though people have since

generations. When talking about “theatre,” China’s younger generations immediately refer to the western theatre. The conventional performing style of Kun opera creates a gap of understanding among Chinese theatre audiences. Though the Chinese audience still has general knowledge of the form, acting style, and repertoires of Kun opera, the style has lost the connection to contemporary life and the young audiences are not interested in it. Nowadays, few people still go to see Kun opera performances, which are often staged by a small circle of artists and audiences.

In 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) announced a list of nineteen “Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity,” and Kun opera was listed as the first one. Presently, there are only six Kun opera styles in the world, and each preserves a distinct style of Kun opera.¹¹ Some universities offer Kun opera training as part of their programs, such as Chinese Culture University in Taiwan. As Gu¹² and Hui¹³ point out, recently there have been some big productions of Kun opera sponsored by the government of People’s Republic of China each year as well.¹⁴ In 2004, there was a short-lived trend among Taiwanese to see the revival of the *Peony Pavilion*, one of the most famous Kun opera repertoires. This trend was started by a famous Taiwanese writer, Hsien-Yung Pai, but its effect was temporary. What Hsien-Yung Pai appreciated and wanted to revive is the traditional way of performing Kun opera. Gu and Hui also mention that

become aware that being westernized is not equal to being modern, the term is set and continued to be used.

¹¹ Zhang Hong, “The Palace of Eternal Youth, the Ultimate Kunqu Opera,” *Chinatoday* 2005, <http://www.chinavoc.com/arts/perform/opera/kunqu1.htm> (accessed June 9, 2010).

¹² Du-Huang Gu served as vice-president of Su Zhou Department of Cultural Affairs, founded many Kun opera research centers and Kun opera companies, and published at least four magazines for Kun opera.

¹³ Hai-Ming Hui earned a PhD degree in sociology. He serves as an official in Su Zhou government.

¹⁴ Du-Huang Gu and Hai-Ming Hui, “Preservation of Kun opera 搶救崑曲的生死關頭,” *Kunqu Society* 2009, <http://kunqsociety.org/cn-fan-discussion-gu-1> (accessed November 29, 2009).

currently many artists try to create contemporary productions of Kun opera, adding western theatre elements such as lighting, setting, and special effects, but the main structure and style remains the same as traditional and conventional Kun opera.¹⁵

Among other traditional Chinese operas, Kun opera is distinguished by its particular style of song and dance. The distinctive characteristics of Kun opera include its slow tempo, refined language, and the exquisite detail expressed in every vocal and body movement. The performance is highly stylized, and it is accompanied by simple and symbolic settings that usually include one table and two chairs.¹⁶ The traditional costumes and makeup used in Kun opera are also standardized so that the audience can easily recognize each of the characters and their traits. The main music instrument used in Kun opera is the Kun flute, accompanied by a zither, huqin,¹⁷ cymbal and drum.¹⁸ As mentioned before, Kun opera only has a limited number of repertoires¹⁹ and every group chooses from the same number of repertoires to perform. Therefore, the music is played by a group of experienced musicians—every member knows all the repertoires, and they usually accompany the actors on the spot and improvise from certain patterns to assist the acting.²⁰ Singing also plays an important role in Kun opera, and even the speeches are delivered with a special tone that differs from casual, everyday speech.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jack Chen, *The Chinese Theatre* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1949), 27.

¹⁷ A two-stringed bow instrument.

¹⁸ Robert C. Provine, Yosihiko Tokumaru, and J. Lawrence Witzleben, *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 7: East Asia: China, Japan, and Korea*. (Routledge, 2001), 289-296.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The definition of the term “improvise” is negotiable here because it not completely free and unconstrained. For example, if an actor walks out, the band performs a certain music piece to accompany the walking. But each time the music is different, because the music band needs to observe the actors and accompanies them spontaneously and in time with their movements.



Figure 1. 閩門旦 the Dan roles. Society of Kunqu Arts, “Lady White Snake,” <http://www.kunqu.org/epicture1.html>.



Figure 2. 武旦 the Wu Dan roles. Society of Kunqu Arts, “Lady White Snake,” <http://www.kunqu.org/epicture1.html>.

Likewise, the acting conventions represent different emotions. For example, the actor who plays the character Xu Xian in *The Legend of White Snake* will perform falling on the ground, losing his shoe, grabbing that shoe in his hand without knowing it and looking for his lost shoe up and down—all of this to represent Xu Xian’s frantic mental state. This series of actions are fixed, and the audience who knows these conventions expects to see actors performing these actions perfectly on stage.

The conventions of Kun opera movement are abstract and complicated. Like the repertoire of Kun opera, the conventions of Kun opera movement are limited. The concept of performance conventions is put into general education and the Chinese audience is likely to find more connection with the conventions than in the outside audience since the movements take shape from everyday life. As GuoGuang Opera Company²¹ lists on its official website, the conventions are “imitation and

²¹ GuoGuang (國光, meaning “glory of the nation”) Opera Company is the only large-scale opera company founded and sponsored by government of Republic of China, Taiwan.

dramatization of everyday performances”²² and meant to help the audiences associate the conventions with their meanings. For example, to perform the movement “opening door,” the performers starts with walking forward, lifting up hands as touching an invisible bolt. With one hand holding the invisible bolt, the other hand acts out a movement as lifting the bolt. The movement ends with the performer pushing a same invisible door and striding over an invisible threshold.²³

When learning Kun opera, the performers specialize in particular types of roles. The general types of roles are Sheng roles (male roles), Dan roles (female roles), Jin roles (male roles with very strong personalities), and Chou roles (clown roles). These general types of roles can be further divided into other, more specific types. For example, in the White Snake story, the most important types of roles are Dan (female roles), Xiao Sheng (young men), Wu Sheng (male martial artists), and Wu Dan (female martial artists).

The traditional Kun opera costumes relate to the role types. Just as other conventions can be recognized by the audience who is familiar with those of Kun opera, the costume conventions show how each style manifests the role types. In *The Legend of White Snake*, the most important role types are the Dan, Wu Dan, Xiao Sheng, and Wu Sheng. The costumes of Dan roles are designed to show the female characters’ youth and beauty.²⁴ The Wu Dan roles need to perform martial arts so their costumes do not have water sleeves and they wear pants that help them move

²² “The Arts of Performance.” GuoGuang Opera Company.

<http://www.kk.gov.tw/onweb.jsp?webno=333333354> (accessed May 19, 2010).

²³ This convention is so representative that in school students practice this when learning about traditional Chinese opera.

²⁴ There are seven types of Dan roles in Kun opera. The Dan role in *The Legend of White Snake* belongs to the category of 閨門旦. Comparing with other Dan roles, this type is the most popular type. The other Dan roles can be easily distinguished from 閨門旦 as they represent old women, young women, women with martial arts, and women with tempers (without the water sleeves).

easily. The leading Sheng role, Xu Xian, in the *Legend of White Snake* belongs to the Jin Sheng roles which represent the young and cultivated male roles. They are not government officials so they do not wear government official clothes and hats. Usually the Jin Sheng roles are the main characters in love stories. The Wu Sheng roles do not wear fake beards or elaborate headdresses. Their costume style is designed to easily perform martial arts.

Kun opera Organizations in the United States

The difficulty of promoting Kun opera in the United States is not only due to the language barrier, but also to the highly conventional performing style. As previously mentioned, the conventions of Kun opera movement are based on traditional Chinese society, and even the younger generations do not have a connection with its stories and the performance style. For example, without the background knowledge, the American audience can hardly recognize the costumes of Kun opera are in the style of traditional Chinese or imagine what the movements of “opening doors” are trying to convey.

Although there are many difficulties in promoting Kun opera in the United States, the value of Kun opera as a part of Chinese cultural heritage is recognized by scholars and artists who are devoted to preserving and promoting the art. There are many scholars and artists who have immigrated from China and Taiwan and want to build their own communities through performing Kun opera. One of the main methods used to promote Kun opera in the United States is through the work of non-profit organizations. Their activities are usually very similar: they often offer regular

workshops, classes, or demonstrations, and one to three bigger events each year, such as performances for celebrating Chinese New Year. The workshops, classes, and demonstrations are educational in that they teach the participants the meanings and culture of Kun opera. The participants can learn through the classes or by doing the movements and/or putting on the makeup by themselves. These strategies are meant to overcome the large gap between cultures and generations, specifically, the differences between Kun opera culture and western theatre concepts. Because these organizations are not-for-profit, the members usually only perform on important dates, such as the anniversary of the organization, or on Chinese New Year.

The Kunqu Society in New York City and the Society of Kunqu Arts in Maryland are two non-profit Kun opera organizations that are currently active. These organizations were established by Chinese artists and scholars in the United States. The members consist of scholars, artists, and others who are interested in Kun opera. Hui-Hsin Wang is the director and founder of Society of Kunqu Arts in Maryland and also one of the co-founders of Kunqu Society in New York. She has learned, performed, and promoted Kun opera for more than thirty years. The president of Kunqu Society since 1997 is Anna Chen who graduated from National Tawain Normal University with a M.A. in Chinese Classical literature. The other artists are all Chinese, and have all been trained to be professional performers or scholars who specialize in Kun opera.²⁵ The Kunqu Society was founded in 1988 in New York City

²⁵ The websites of Society of Kunqu Arts and Kunqu Society features biographies of their board members and artists. These biographies clearly show that they are educated in either Taiwan or China.

and is dedicated to the “study, promotion and preservation of Kun opera.” Kunqu Society states on their official website that their mission is:²⁶

- (1) To present Kunqu²⁷ performances and give educational lecture/demonstrations in order to increase awareness of and introduce new audiences to Kunqu;
- (2) To offer low-cost Kunqu classes to the general public;
- (3) To provide opportunities for Kunqu artists to showcase, maintain and sharpen their performing skills and to teach and pass on the Kunqu art; and,
- (4) To produce and maintain written and audio/visual materials about Kunqu (newsletters, CDs and tapes) for the purposes of documentation and preservation.

Founded in 1995, the Society of Kunqu Arts also endeavors to “preserve the Chinese cultural heritage of Kunqu [Kun opera], study and advance the art of Kunqu, as well as introduce Kunqu to the local communities.”²⁸

According to their mission statements, both organizations show their interest in, and emphasis on, the preservation of Kun opera as overseas or immigrated artists or scholars. As artists who were trained to be professionals and/or scholars who specialize in Kun opera, their hope is to present and preserve what they learn and to attract the local communities with their art. The goals of their workshops, classes, and demonstrations are to teach traditional Kun opera in its traditional style. For example,

²⁶ “The Society of Kunqu Arts.” Society of Kunqu Arts.

<http://www.kunqusociety.org/html/missionandhistory.htm> (accessed April 3, 2010).

²⁷ The term “kunqu” means “Kun opera.” “Qu” is the transliteration of “song” and used here to mean “opera” as in Chinese “Kunqu” is a set term meaning “Kun opera.”

²⁸ “The Society of Kunqu Arts.” Society of Kunqu Arts.

<http://www.kunqusociety.org/html/missionandhistory.htm> (accessed April 3, 2010).

the Kunqu Society in New York teaches regular Kun singing, dancing, acting, and flute classes on every Saturday of the month and presents five performances for celebration and annual performance.²⁹

While some active overseas Kun opera groups teach and perform the “pure,” “original,” and “traditional” Kun opera, Chinese Theatre Workshop does the same, but in addition they utilize the concept of “transformation” to help keep the interest in Kun opera alive: “Transformation” is the word used by CTW to describe their adaptation and cultural synthesis of hybrid performances. They attempt to “transform” Kun opera by incorporating cross-cultural strategies in their performance with hopes to bridge cultural gaps and maintain Chinese cultural traditions and performance styles.

Chinese Theatre Works

Chinese Theatre Works was founded in 2001 by Kung-Yu Fong as a non-profit organization in New York City with the merger of two companies, The Gold Mountain Institute for Traditional Shadow Theatre (founded in 1975) and Chinese Theatre Workshop (founded in 1990). In my interview with Fong,³⁰ she explained that the history of the company can be traced back to 1930s when Red Gate Players was founded by Pauline Benton. Benton was the first to bring Chinese shadow puppetry arts to the United States. The works of Benton inspired Jo Humphrey who founded the Gold Mountain Institute in 1975 and created duplicates of shadow

²⁹ Both of the organizations are local non-profit Kun opera organizations. Their events and activities can be found on their official websites. Society of Kunqu Arts event calendar is at <http://www.kunqu.org/bindex.html> and Kunqu Society’s calendar is at <http://www.kunqusociety.org/index.htm>.

³⁰ Kung-Yu Fong, interview by author, 30 December 2009, Queens, NY, tape recording.

figures³¹ from the collection of the American Museum of Natural History.³²

Humphrey's style was to preserve and present the original materials of Chinese shadow puppetry. She translated and adapted Chinese literary classics and folk tales and then performed them in a traditional style. Kung-Yu Fong used to be a performer in Humphrey's group. When Humphrey wanted to retire and hand down her company, she passed it to Fong.

During my 2009 interview, Fong said that she thinks Humphrey's works were about "preservation." Fong inherited this idea of preservation, but she is also interested in experimenting with Kun opera and cross-cultural performance.³³ Therefore, CTW states on their official website that it is dedicated to "the mission of preserving and promoting traditional Chinese performing arts, creating new works that bridge Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics and forms,"³⁴ and showing "aspects of the contemporary Chinese experience from slowly changing gender roles to immigration to the U.S.." ³⁵

In 2001, when the two companies merged and became Chinese Theatre Works under the direction of Kung-Yu Fong, Fong had Humphrey's permission to create and develop work in a new direction. On their official website, CTW claims:

The present company carries on both its predecessors' missions, as well as their commitments to education as a key part of our work. CTW's programs cut across ethnic and cultural boundaries, and aim at sparking interest in Chinese cultural

³¹ These shadow figures are made and used in the traditional ways, casting shadows on screen by the puppeteers.

³² "The Pauline Benton Collection." Chinese Theatre Works.

<http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/projects/benton.html> (accessed April 9, 2009).

³³ Kung-Yu Fong, interview by author, 30 December 2009, Queens, NY, tape recording.

³⁴ "Mission of Chinese Theatre Works." Chinese Theatre Works. <http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/> (accessed February 14, 2010).

³⁵ "A Brief History..." Chinese Theatre Works. <http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/> (accessed June 9, 2010).

traditions among the wider public as well as reinforcing it in Chinese Americans who have not had access to this part of their heritage.³⁶

CTW clearly states their goal in “sparking interest in Chinese cultural traditions” by creating performances that can “cross ethnic and cultural boundaries.”

There are different layers to CTW’s meaning and use of the terms “transformation” and “bridge.” Stephen Kaplin talks about their projects in his article “Bridge of Wings.”³⁷ Perhaps the terms “transformation” and “bridge” as used by CTW can be better understood as “hybridity” in that Kaplin discusses CTW’s “melding of performance genres” and how he “used medium to translate and interpret classical forms of Chinese opera performance for American audiences.” In other words, the original materials, such as the performing genre or texts of the Kun opera, are changed and “transformed” into a hybridized production to help CTW’s American audience understand the production.

Although there are many aspects to the term “hybridity,” it is necessary to understand the phrase as it is used in CTW’s productions. First, *White Snake* can be considered a hybrid production in that it mixes opera with puppetry. But it is also a mixing of Chinese and American art forms and culture as well as a combination of older, traditional art forms with more contemporary art forms. For example, half of the shadow puppets in *The Legend of White Snake* were antiques from China, and sometimes the artistic director of CTW mentions that the storytelling style (with shadow puppets) is in Chinese style. Even though there were very few Americans involved in the production (Stephen Kaplin and a few puppeteers), when promoting

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Stephen Kaplin and Kung-Yu Fong, “Bridge of Wings,” *Puppetry International* 12 (Fall 2002): 22-27.

and advertising the show, CTW describes their performance as “American contemporary shadow puppet theatre.” The theme of their performances ranges from those of the traditional Kun opera repertoire to Chinese folk tales, and even *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Kung-Yu Fong, the director of CTW, is in charge of the Kun opera performances, Chinese cultural materials, and is also a puppeteer. Fong graduated from Chinese Culture University³⁸ in Taiwan. She was trained as a professional traditional Chinese opera performer in both Peking opera and Kun opera. Fong taught in Chinese Culture University for four years and then came to the United States for a graduate program in Educational Theatre at New York University. After receiving her Master’s degree, Fong stayed in the United States, devoting herself to Kun opera and teaching at Pace University. Fong is also on the Board of UNIMA-USA, the international puppetry organization’s U.S. branch on which she has served since 2003.

Although Fong is the artistic director of CTW, Fong’s husband, Stephen Kaplin, also plays an important part in this organization. Stephen Kaplin directs most of the shadow puppetry in CTW. He was trained at the University of Connecticut, which offers puppetry training in their theatre department. Kaplin has a Master’s degree in performance studies from NYU. When Kaplin and Fong married, they started their own performing groups. Stephen Kaplin founded Great Small Works and Kong-Yu Fong worked for her Chinese Theatre Workshop while also performing in Humphrey’s productions, but after the merger of CTW in 2001, they started to work together. When I interviewed Fong about Kaplin’s willingness to give up his own

³⁸ Founded in 1962, Chinese Culture University’s mission is to promote Chinese culture.

performing group and work with Fong to preserve, experiment, and perform the Kun opera, Fong answered: “Comparing the Kun opera and puppetry, Stephen decides to devote to Kun opera which has even less popularity than puppetry in the United States. Therefore, Stephen thinks it is more important to perform and preserve Kun opera in the United States, and he would like to help me to achieve this goal.”³⁹

CTW performs both traditional pieces and original productions. Their repertoire of traditional pieces includes selections from classic traditional Chinese opera. Since 2001, they have most frequently performed *Monkey King Steals the Heavenly Peaches*, *Fighting in the Dark*, *The Peony Pavilion*, and *Farewell My Concubine*. Unlike their production of *The Legend of White Snake*, these performances feature only original Kun opera without puppetry, and all the performances are performed in Chinese without English narration. These performances are for the Chinese audiences who understand Chinese and can appreciate the performing style of Kun opera. Therefore, CTW presents these performances on Chinese holidays, such as Chinese New Year, so that more Chinese audiences will come to their performance to celebrate.

Because of the different techniques CTW uses in their original productions, they can be grouped into three different categories. The first kind of productions are puppetry performances (including both the kinds of puppets and shadow figures), such as *Kasper as a Banana*, *Tiger Tales*, *The Birth of Monkey King*, *Zodiac!*, *Three Women*, *Many Plays*, and *Ti-Oh-Oh*. The second kind is performed by performers and no puppetry involved, such as *Border of Womanhood* and *Little Red Riding Hood: The Chinese Opera*. The third kind is performed both by puppets and performers, for

³⁹ Kung-Yu Fong, interview by author, 30 December 2009, Queens, NY, tape recording.

example, *The Legend of White Snake*, *Monkey King in America: Day Jobs*, *Opera Dreams*, and *Toy Theatre Peony Pavilion*.

Although we can categorize the CTW performances into three groups by form, these performances cannot be clearly categorized by sources because all the productions are blended or inspired by Chinese folk tales or literature classics. There is only one exception: *Little Red Riding Hood: The Chinese Opera*, which is an opera version of the well-known folk tale *Little Red Riding Hood*. Of note, however, is that the production texts of the other pieces are not mere adaptations of Chinese folk tales or literature. In most of the performances, the reoccurring theme is their portrayal of Chinese immigrants in the United States as evident in *Monkey King in America: Day Jobs*, *Opera Dreams* and *Three Women, Many Plays* all embody this theme. For example, *Monkey King* dramatizes how Kun opera performers that immigrate to the United States struggle between day jobs that support themselves and their passion of Kun opera.

Among these productions, *The Legend of White Snake* is a big production for CTW since it requires the performances of both Kun opera actors and puppeteers, as well as a traditional Chinese music band to accompany their performance. *The Legend of White Snake* is called “Kun/Shadow White Snake”⁴⁰ on CTW’s website introduction since the performance mixes traditional Kun opera with their self-proclaimed “contemporary American puppetry.” Although *Monkey King in America: Day Jobs*, *Opera Dreams* and *Toy Theatre Peony Pavilion* also share some of the same features (like the blending form of puppetry and Kun opera), *White Snake* is the

⁴⁰ The name “Kun/Shadow White Snake” is only used on their website. During the productions and when promoted their productions, they always called it as “*The Legend of White Snake*,” so I will use the name *The Legend of White Snake* since they use it more frequently.

earliest work among the three pieces. Right after CTW was founded in 2001, they presented *The Legend of White Snake*. White Snake was later performed twice in 2009. Therefore, we can see what changes CTW made from 2001 to 2009 and, in comparing the various productions, we can deduce how CTW perceives “Chinese cultural traditions” and interprets “American taste” by observing the consistencies and deviations between productions.



Figure 4. 巾生 the Sheng roles. Society of Kunqu Arts, “Lady White Snake,” <http://www.kunqu.org/epicture1.html>.



Figure 3. 武生 the Wu Sheng roles. Society of Kunqu Arts, “Lady White Snake,” <http://www.kunqu.org/epicture1.html>.

Chapter 2: CTW's *The Legend of White Snake*: Plot Overview and Character Analysis

The origin of the White Snake folk tale is beyond our scope here, but the fact is that the White Snake story has deep roots in Chinese history and culture. Although the details of the story change accordingly with time, the story always addresses a consistent theme that reveals the role of women in traditional Chinese society and the social restrictions that are often placed upon them.

Although the structure, characters, and the basic storyline are fixed among the various versions of the story, the nuances of each version are ever-changing. To examine the nuances of each version will digress from my focus; thus I will only consider the basic storyline and characters in order to reveal the gender issues that the White Snake folk tale generally addresses. After establishing what the White Snake folk tale has done traditionally, I will then juxtapose CTW's version of the folktale with its traditional plotline, suggesting how CTW's version could be possibly interpreted by an American audience that is not familiar with Chinese culture or the White Snake folk tale.

The traditional story depicts White Snake, a snake spirit that transforms into a beautiful woman. White Snake has a subordinate companion, Blue Snake, who also transforms from a blue snake spirit into a young woman. While in the form of a woman, the White Snake spirit starts a relationship with a man, Xu Xian, who does not know White Snake is a snake spirit when the romance begins. A Buddhist monk, Fa Hai, constantly attempts to separate White Snake from Xu Xian because Fa Hai is

jealous of White Snake's power. As Xu Xian grows hesitant in this relationship, White Snake, with the aid of Blue Snake, fights with magic power and martial arts to retain her relationship and status as a human being. In the end, the Buddhist monk successfully captures White Snake and imprisons her under the Lei Feng Pagoda.

At first glance, the norms of gender in traditional Chinese society do not seem to be directly evident in the White Snake folk tale, but if one examines the whole story, it reinforces traditional gender norms. Though White Snake and Blue Snake can fight for themselves, the final outcome is the same—that White Snake is punished and women are posited as inferior to men, and this seems to be the moral of this folk tale.

To analyze the White Snake folk tale, I will use Jian-Zhong Wan's discussion of ten types of taboos in Chinese folk tales.⁴¹ The White Snake folk tale can be interpreted as the Chinese version of "Swan Maiden." Wan points out that in this kind of story an ordinary male character meets a female character, usually a female animal spirit who has higher rank/power than the male character in terms of beauty, wealth, or celestial status. The female character has an object to represent her true identity. The male character discovers and takes away the object and makes the female character submissive and marries him. The representation of female character's true identity becomes her weakness, which shows that there is intentionality in compromising the female character due to the inherent sexism in the culture.

CTW's *The Legend of White Snake* focuses on the transformation and relationship of White Snake, keeping the original structure and characters of the traditional version. Briefly, in CTW's version, White Snake is also a snake spirit and has an equal companion, Blue Snake. Both of them are strong and powerful. White

⁴¹ Jian-Zhong Wan, *Interpreting Taboos* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2001), 125-127.

Snake and Blue Snake transform into women and White Snake marries Xu Xian. White Snake is envied by Fa Hai, a Buddhist monk who transforms from a toad spirit. Fa Hai then intervenes in her marriage by telling Xu Xian that White Snake is not a human being but a snake spirit. Xu Xian is easily persuaded and goes back to test White Snake. He makes White Snake drink “a demon-catching wine”⁴² the power of which transforms White Snake back to her true form—half snake and half human. Xu Xian is shocked by the result and faints. In order to treat Xu Xian, White Snake flies to Fairy Mountains and fights with celestial martial generals, risking her life to steal a magic mushroom. Xu Xian recovers by drinking the brew from the magic mushroom, but he is terrified and suspicious that White Snake is evil in some way because she is a snake spirit. Before long, White Snake becomes pregnant. Xu Xian goes to Gold Mountain Temple to pray for blessings for his son and unintentionally meets Fa Hai at the temple. Fa Hai successfully persuades Xu Xian that White Snake is evil and then hides and locks Xu Xian in his temple. This action provokes White Snake to fight with the support of Blue Snake, but the two snake spirits are defeated due to White Snake’s pregnancy. They fly to West Lake and accidentally meet Xu Xian because they do not know that Xu Xian is also escaping from Fa Hai’s temple and has come to the West Lake. Though the two snake sisters’ original intention is to free Xu Xian from the temple, upon seeing him, Blue Snake is enraged by Xu Xian’s unfaithfulness and wants to kill him. White Snake, out of her love for Xu Xian, stops Blue Snake. Soon after the three reunite, White Snake gives birth to a son. Fa Hai then disguises himself as a rice bowl seller and again comes for revenge. While White Snake sees through Fa Hai’s trap and tries to stop Xu Xian, Xu Xian does not listen to

⁴² Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 5.

White Snake and opens the rice bowl lid. Fa Hai then captures White Snake with the rice bowl and imprisons her under Lei Feng Pagoda.

I am interested in analyzing CTW's version from the standpoint of an audience member who is not familiar with the story, which means the audience member is unequipped to recognize the changes between the traditional and CTW versions. This enables me to examine what CTW possibly presents as "Chinese cultural traditions" to its audience. In addition, the formation of CTW's version of the tale also helps to manifest its contemporaneous message which could be a "bridge" for the audience especially when CTW aims to show "aspects of the contemporary Chinese experience from slowly changing gender roles."⁴³ The play's adaptation reflects CTW's philosophy regarding hybridity and transformation. While CTW produced the piece several times, Fong and Kaplan keep revising the script, continuously attempting to make it more "blended" and "bridged." The first production was performed in 2002, and the second and third productions were both performed in 2009. To analyze CTW's version of *The Legend of White Snake*, I will focus on the script from their latest production, which is the closest to their ideal.

In this play, White Snake is an unconventional character set in traditional Chinese society because she has the power to transform, the independence to "choose themselves to marry,"⁴⁴ fight with martial arts, be faithful, and give life. As a woman transformed from a snake spirit, White Snake constantly fights for the right of her relationship with Xu Xian, but eventually loses her power and is defeated by two men, Xu Xian and Fa Hai.

⁴³ "A Brief History...." Chinese Theatre Works. <http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/> (accessed June 9, 2010).

⁴⁴ Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 4.

In CTW's version, Blue Snake is the companion of White Snake. She also possesses the power of transformation and martial arts. Her most notable characteristic is her faithfulness to White Snake. As a companion of White Snake, Blue Snake always takes White Snake's side—she helps White Snake fight with Fa Hai to win Xu Xian back and she is enraged by Xu Xian's unfaithfulness and wants to kill him for White Snake's sake. In other words, Blue Snake demonstrates the power of female bonding with her support and devotion to White Snake. Compared to the traditional version in which requires Blue Snake is subordinate to White Snake, CTW's version abandons the hierarchical relationship and presents a modern friendship between the female characters.

Xu Xian is the opposite of White Snake. While White Snake has all kinds of power, Xu Xian lacks admirable characteristics and abilities. He cannot transform, fight, be faithful, or give life. Among all his incapacities, Xu Xian's unfaithfulness can be regarded as the fatal cause of White Snake's fall. The first time Xu Xian is unfaithful is when he believes Fa Hai's word and makes White Snake drink Shung Huang wine, which transforms her back to the form of a snake spirit; the second time he is again persuaded by Fa Hai and makes White Snake do battle with Fa Hai; the third time Xu Xian betrays White Snake is when she tells Xu Xian not to open the bowl Fa Hai brings, but Xu Xian turns away from listening to her and White Snake is sucked inside Fa Hai's bowl and imprisoned under the Lei Feng Pagoda. Therefore, even when White Snake is Xu Xian's wife, Xu Xian repeatedly chooses to betray his wife in favor of another man, Fa Hai. In other words, Xu Xian's actions speak to how men compete with women to maintain an elevated status.

In the eyes of Fa Hai, White Snake is a threat to his world. Like White Snake, Fa Hai also has the power to transform from a toad spirit to a human being, but White Snake possesses more power than Fa Hai. Her capacity threatens Fa Hai and Fa Hai is always jealous of White Snake since they competed for a magic pill and Fa Hai lost to White Snake. At that time, Fa Hai swore, “you’re too strong for me now, sisters. But wheels will turn. In my next incarnation, I will crush you.”⁴⁵ Fa Hai is weaker than White Snake and Blue Snake, and he has to wait and gain more power to revenge. When he finally gains the power to transform to a human being, he “saw the couple [White Snake and Xu Xian] living together happily and was enraged”⁴⁶ and starts his revenge. With the help of Xu Xian’s unfaithfulness, Fa Hai finally captures and imprisons White Snake under the Lei Feng Pagoda. As White Snake’s power is stripped away, the threat in Fa Hai’s world is eliminated at the same time.

Major Themes in CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake*

In CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* there are three major themes explored throughout the script: transformation, in/fidelity, and gender status. To fully analyze the messages CTW conveys through their dramatization of each theme, one has to consider CTW’s stated goals regarding their cross-cultural performances, their attempt to preserve and spark the audiences’ interest in Chinese cultural traditions, and their desire to challenge gender roles. Recognizing that CTW’s target audience includes those who do not know the background or history of the traditional White Snake folk tale, CTW adapts the Chinese folk tale to create a hybrid performance that

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

encompasses both traditional and contemporary elements. In so doing, CTW's audience is introduced to a version of the White Snake tale that is performed through CTW's artistic filter. Thus, in examining the various themes evident in CTW's version of the White Snake folk tale, CTW's script—whether consciously or unconsciously—reveals a number of socio-political messages that may be absorbed by contemporary audiences. In the following section, I will explore how these messages reflect their goal of bridging cultures by representing both traditional and contemporary Chinese culture to Americanized audiences.

To discuss CTW's version, one has to connect their play with their goal of “mixing” and to “cut across ethnic and cultural boundaries.”⁴⁷ The story *The Legend of White Snake* is tightly related to the theme of “transformation.” This theme is brought out at the beginning of the prologue when the narrator says, “Stories are told how all things grow and change. Stone becomes plant, plant becomes animal. And animal perhaps becomes human.”⁴⁸ This prologue shows that the theme of “transformation” is not limited to one way of form-changing, but rather it includes a wide range of how things “grow” and “become,” with a particular focus on how animals transform into human beings. The keyword “transformation” plays an important part in both the storyline and relationships between characters as animals to human, child to adult, and objects to other objects.

“Transformation” is the cause of Fa Hai's enmity against White Snake since the power required by this kind of transformation (from animal spirits to human beings) makes Fa Hai jealous of White Snake: “...that's how White Snake earned herself

⁴⁷ “A Brief History....” Chinese Theatre Works. <http://www.chinesetheatreworks.org/> (accessed June 9, 2010).

⁴⁸ Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 1.

great power. How she came to wear a woman's body."⁴⁹ The play indicates two ways to gain power: one is through practicing the rule of Taoism (as exemplified by White Snake who engaged in "centuries of ceaseless meditation" and "slowly master[ed] cosmic energies"⁵⁰ or like Fa Hai who obtained power by "gathering chi for five thousand years")⁵¹ and the another method to gain the power of transformation is to eat a "magic pill."⁵² The difference between the two methods is the amount of effort one needs to put in to gain power. The first method requires one's hard work and concentration to master the rule of Taoism, while using the second method relies more on opportunity. Fa Hai's enmity towards White Snake starts from the magic pill incident. In CTW's script, the magic pill is originally given to young Xu Xian to treat an illness. As a child, Xu Xian goes to play and accidentally coughs out the pill and the magic pill drops in a lake where White Snake, Blue Snake, and Fa Hai live. At that time, White Snake's power is stronger than Fa Hai, so she wins the magic pill and gains more power of transformation. Both methods show that White Snake's transformation involves a power struggle. Moreover, both methods (mastering the rules of Taoism and taking the magic pill) implicitly and explicitly show that White Snake is stronger than Fa Hai, and White Snake's power thus makes her become the target enemy of a male, Fa Hai.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵² The idea of transformation comes from Taoism. Taoists believe that animals and human beings can transform to another form. Usually it involves a change to a "better" rank as animals to human and human to immortals. The scripts indicate two methods to transform, one is to practice the rules of Taoism on one's own, emphasizing self-reflection; another method is to gain power from the outside, such as eating a magic pill. CTW's version also uses "chi" to describe the power. Shao DagnYan and Xi Jin Zhong, eds., 《蛇性之淫》的創作與《白蛇傳》的蛻變*Creative Works on the Lust of Serpent and White Snake Folk Tale* (Zhe Jiang: ZheJiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1996), 319.

The power of transformation has different meanings in relation to White Snake and Fa Hai due to their gender roles. In Xu Jiang's book *Dancing White Snake*, Jiang points out White Snake's "different task" as a woman, because women are considered inferior and need to learn and undergo more trials.⁵³ In CTW's Shadow Sequence 2,⁵⁴ White Snake marries Xu Xian and "they were supremely happy with...each other."⁵⁵ At this moment, Fa Hai has already transformed into a Buddhist monk. He tells Xu Xian that White Snake is a "demon," defined as, "a slimy one thousand year old snake" and would "devour" Xu Xian.⁵⁶ Xu Xian quickly believes Fa Hai and tests White Snake with a "demon catching wine."⁵⁷ After drinking the wine, White Snake temporarily loses her power and is changed back to her primal form of snake spirit. For White Snake, having the power of transformation brings her jealousy and persecution from men.

On the contrary, Fa Hai has the same power to transform from an animal spirit to a man, and he can oppress White Snake and win trust from Xu Xian. First, Fa Hai accuses White Snake's relationship with Xu Xian as "violating the laws of Dharma."⁵⁸ Then, Fa Hai denounces White Snake as a "demon," although he himself is also a transformed animal spirit. This action shows that while both White Snake and Fa Hai have the same power of transformation, as a male, Fa Hai has the authority to demonize White Snake. Clearly, CTW creates a male-biased world since

⁵³ Jian Xun, *Dancing White Snake* (Taipei: YLib, 2004), 93.

⁵⁴ CTW divides their performance into a series of shadow sequence and opera scenes in between. Each shadow sequence illustrates a main plot in the story.

⁵⁵ Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ The term "Dharma" is from Hinduism, meaning the doctrine of Hinduism, but CTW used the term to mean that the relationship between an animal spirit and a human being is not right.

their script ultimately reinforces inequalities between men and women and inevitably asserts that women are at a disadvantage when they have power over men.

Relating to the theme “transformation” is the theme of “in/fidelity.” In the eyes of Xu Xian, the relationship with White Snake and her power of transformation is perplexing and intriguing. His constant unfaithfulness is shown in his attitude towards White Snake. Therefore, if putting manhood and marriage on the same scale, Xu Xian leans towards manhood instead of towards White Snake, and the same goes for his own marriage. The subtext is repeated two times in the play, in the Shadow Sequence 3 as the second and Shadow Sequence 4 as the third. After White Snake drinks the Shung Huang wine and is forced to transform back to her primal form, Xu Xian collapses and is “near death.”⁵⁹ Even after White Snake risks her life to save Xu Xian, Xu Xian is still “terrified” and “never spoke again about that day.”⁶⁰ This makes him quickly betray White Snake the second time when he abandons her in his monkhood. Leaving a pregnant wife at home, Xu Xian, again persuaded by Fa Hai, immerses himself in “the light of truth”⁶¹ in Fa Hai’s temple. The last time Xu Xian betrays White Snake is when he turns from her warning and opens the rice bowl brought by the disguised Fa Hai. His unfaithfulness decides the tragic fate of White Snake.

On the contrary, when it comes to “fidelity,” the first female character that comes to mind is Blue Snake. Blue Snake demonstrates supreme loyalty to White Snake. CTW chooses to represent White Snake and Blue Snake as “sisters” or equals versus making Blue Snake subservient to White Snake as in the White Snake folk tale. CTW’s arrangement highlights the idea of loyalty by choice and friendship

⁵⁹ Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

versus anything that is “required”—Blue Snake is not at all controlled by the structure of the relationship, but seems to be pure of heart in terms of her loyalty. For example, in Shadow Sequence 1, when White Snake and Blue Snake both see that magic pill, neither of them fights for it. Instead, they decide to share it:

Blue Snake: Look, elder sister. If you eat that magic pill, you will become an immortal!

*White Snake: Let's split it.*⁶²

Unlike Fa Hai's jealousy and enmity, the two snake spirits demonstrate compassion and sisterhood when they encounter the temptation of power. When Xu Xian betrays White Snake the second time and White Snake needs support to bring her husband back, Blue Snake does not abandon her. Rather, she responds and supports White Snake, “Let's do it [give him a fight], sister!”⁶³ Further, Blue Snake wants to kill Xu Xian on White Snake's behalf because she cannot stand Xu Xian's repeated betrayals. In contrast to the tension in the relationships between men and women, Blue Snake exhibits a strong sense of loyalty in her faithfulness to White Snake.

Just as Blue Snake is very faithful to her sister, White Snake is determined to be faithful in her marriage. Her faithfulness does not change because of Xu Xian's endless betrayals. In fact, Xu Xian's betrayals highlight White Snake's fidelity. When Xu Xian was suspicious and tested White Snake, White Snake chose to endure and drink the Sheng Huang wine and even to risk her life to save Xu Xian's life. The second time White Snake fought with Fa Hai for Xu Xian, and even the last time,

⁶² Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.

White Snake suggests to Xu Xian with soft words “I don’t think you should open it”⁶⁴ instead of turning on him with aggression or force.

Despite the storyline and characters, CTW adapts the story with contemporaneous ideological suggestions as revealed through CTW’s use of language. While the story is still set in the traditional Chinese society, there are new ideas and language that did not exist in the earlier versions of the White Snake folk tale. First, from the beginning of Shadow Sequence 2, Xu Xian and White Snake “chose themselves to marry” and open up a health clinic together. The idea of freedom to start a romance or choose one’s spouse is nonexistent in traditional Chinese society.⁶⁵ Second, it would be highly improbable for White Snake to operate a health clinic with Xu Xian since it used to be considered unbecoming for a decent woman in the traditional Chinese society to have a job that involves a lot of exposure to the public.⁶⁶ Third, in the same shadow sequence, when Xu Xian says, “That is a very old fashioned way to discuss marital relations...I am a feminist and I love her,”⁶⁷ the idea of “feminist” is also contemporary.⁶⁸ Looking at what CTW adds to their

⁶⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁵ In the traditional Chinese society, marriage was decided by parents, the bride and the groom did not have a say in their own marriage. This custom was not changed until the beginning of Republic of China (1911-present) and the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921). From then on, people started to have the freedom to start a relationship and marriage. Feng Xiang Chen and Li Yue Lin, *History II* (Taipei: Chien Hong Publishing, 2000).

⁶⁶ Due to the influence of Confucianism and the patriarchal system, women had long been suppressed by society. One of the customs is that women should not have a lot of exposure to the public. Run Hua Hao, *婦女與道德傳統 Women and Morality Traditions* (Nanjin: Phoenix Publishing & Media Network, 2002), 158.

⁶⁷ Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, *The Legend of White Snake* (unpublished), 4.

⁶⁸ As mentioned above, the first wave of feminist movement in China went along with May Fourth Movement. Foreign missionaries brought new ideas to China, including freedom of marriage, equal rights of women, and women’s education. Feng Xiang Chen and Li Yue Lin, *History II* (Taipei: Chien Hong Publishing, 2000).

scripts, it shows that these ideas are all about issues of gender in Chinese society concern for women's status.

After examining each theme, what CTW presents with their scripts becomes clearer. In the context of contemporary issues of gender, CTW's production attempts to address (if not fully combat) traditional, patriarchal thinking. They present the possibility of women being more powerful than men, yet they also wrestle with this notion, and eventually falling back on a more male-biased perspective. While White Snake has magic and martial power as her aid and seems to break the dominant paternal system of traditional Chinese society, the ending of the folktale shows that patriarchal thinking still lurks in CTW's White Snake folk tale, and thus suppresses the development of the story. When CTW performs this production to the American audience, the audience, through CTW's filter, may view the gender norms—the power struggle and tension between men and women—as representations of traditional Chinese society.

Chapter 3: The Telling: An Intercultural Analysis of *The Legend of White Snake*

In their attempts at “preserv[ing] and spark[ing] interest in the Chinese cultural traditions,” CTW states that it creates “bridging” art forms and thus positions their production in the field of “cross-cultural theatre,” particularly “intercultural theatre.” According to scholar Richard Schechner, the level of mixture determines whether a performance should be considered “intercultural” or “fusion”; the successfully mixed performance belongs to the category of “fusion” and the one that is less successful at merging its various elements is considered “intercultural.”⁶⁹ In order to analyze CTW’s production of *The Legend of White Snake* as a form of intercultural theatre, I will define and differentiate the term “intercultural theatre” from other theories which are subsumed under the umbrella of “cross-cultural theatre” and then apply theories of intercultural theatre to further understand the ways CTW’s uses its theatrical strategies to support its goals.

When CTW claims it uses a “melding of performance genres,” the term “melding” could suggest Schechner’s theories of “fusion” or “interculturalism.” Schechner categorizes different levels of multiple cultural encounters and interactions into three subcategories, defining the theories by differentiating them from “multiculturalism.” He gives a metaphor to describe multiculturalism as an “inversion of the melting pot” because “the individual ingots of ethnicity do not melt or fuse;

⁶⁹ Richard Schechner, “An Intercultural Primer,” *American Theatre Quarterly* (October 1991), 28-31.

each group keeps its own distinct qualities.”⁷⁰ “Fusion,” or “hybrid performance” as Schechner terms it, is the opposite of multiculturalism. If multiculturalism is the inversion of melting pot in which everything remains “separate,” fusion is the mixture and mixing to a degree that it creates a new “society, language or genre of art.”⁷¹ With the definitions of multiculturalism and fusion, Schechner differentiates “interculturalism” from the two. “Interculturalism,” as Schechner explains, explores “what is not pure and what cannot successfully fuse.”⁷² In other words, interculturalism is located in-between multiculturalism and fusion, as it is neither separate nor mixed. In what follows, Schechner offers a more complete idea about the nature of interculturalism:

...[interculturalism] probes the confrontations, ambivalences, disruptions, fears, disturbances and difficulties when and where cultures collide, overlap or pull away from each other⁷³

In applying Schechner’s theory, CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* may initially appear to belong to the category of “fusion.” However, when fully considering that CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* is a combination of elements such as traditional Kun opera, various forms of shadow puppetry, and English narration, one must recognize that many of the elements from the source cultures are “preserved” individually and not thoroughly integrated. Since the original material is not completely altered, transformed, or appropriated, CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* should not be seen as an example of “fusion” but rather as an example of “intercultural” Performance.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁷¹ Ibid., 30.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

In light of the “melding form” mentioned by Kaplin, what is mixed in *The Legend of White Snake* project is more than the form of the actual production. In the theatre space, there are many areas for exchange to occur, and Schechner lists five types: the content, mixing of forms; stage energy and presence; “source” or “core” gestures, sounds, and cultures; and taking place on a border. CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* has all the characteristics of what Schechner lists for interculturalism. For example, CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* adds contemporary language into the traditional Chinese folk tale and has mixed forms in that they add shadow puppetry and English narration into traditional Kun opera. As for the “stage energy and presence,” CTW uses Chinese, Taiwanese, and American performers for their productions, and their stage energy differs due to the different concept of theatre and rehearsal, which I will discuss in detail in later sections. Furthermore, the source, core gestures, and sound of traditional Kun opera are used and preserved in their production.

Expounding on Schechner’s theory, Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert also categorize interculturalism within the domain of cross-cultural theatre. Lo and Gilbert’s theories regarding interculturalism are also helpful in determining how CTW’s production of *White Snake* really belongs to the field of “intercultural theatre.”⁷⁴ Quoting Jonathan Dollimore’s description that “to cross is not only to traverse, but to mix (as in to cross-breed) and to contradict (as in to cross someone),” Lo and Gilbert consider cross-cultural theatre to consist of both “mixing” and

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, “Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis,” *The Drama Review* vol. 46 no. 3 (Fall 2002): 31-53.

“contradicting.”⁷⁵ This idea echoes Schechner’s definition that interculturalism is mixed but not successfully fused. Further, Lo and Gilbert point out that one of the most popular manifestations of the cross-cultural encounter is “the idea of the hybrid (art form, culture, and/or identity).” In other words, intercultural theatre is “a hybrid derived from an intentional encounter between cultures and performing traditions.”⁷⁶ This description seems to apply to CTW’s case as well. For example, in the productions of *White Snake* the materials and especially the traditional Kun opera scenes were inserted into the shadow sequences.

While theorists like Schechner, Lo, and Gilbert offer insight into the definitions of interculturalism, the actual process of CTW’s intercultural production can be further analyzed using Patrice Pavis’ hourglass theory. For the purposes of this case study, Pavis’ hourglass diagram is particularly useful to think about when considering the process used to develop *The Legend of White Snake*:

⁷⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 288.

⁷⁶ Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, “Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis,” *The Drama Review* vol. 46 no. 3 (Fall 2002): 36.

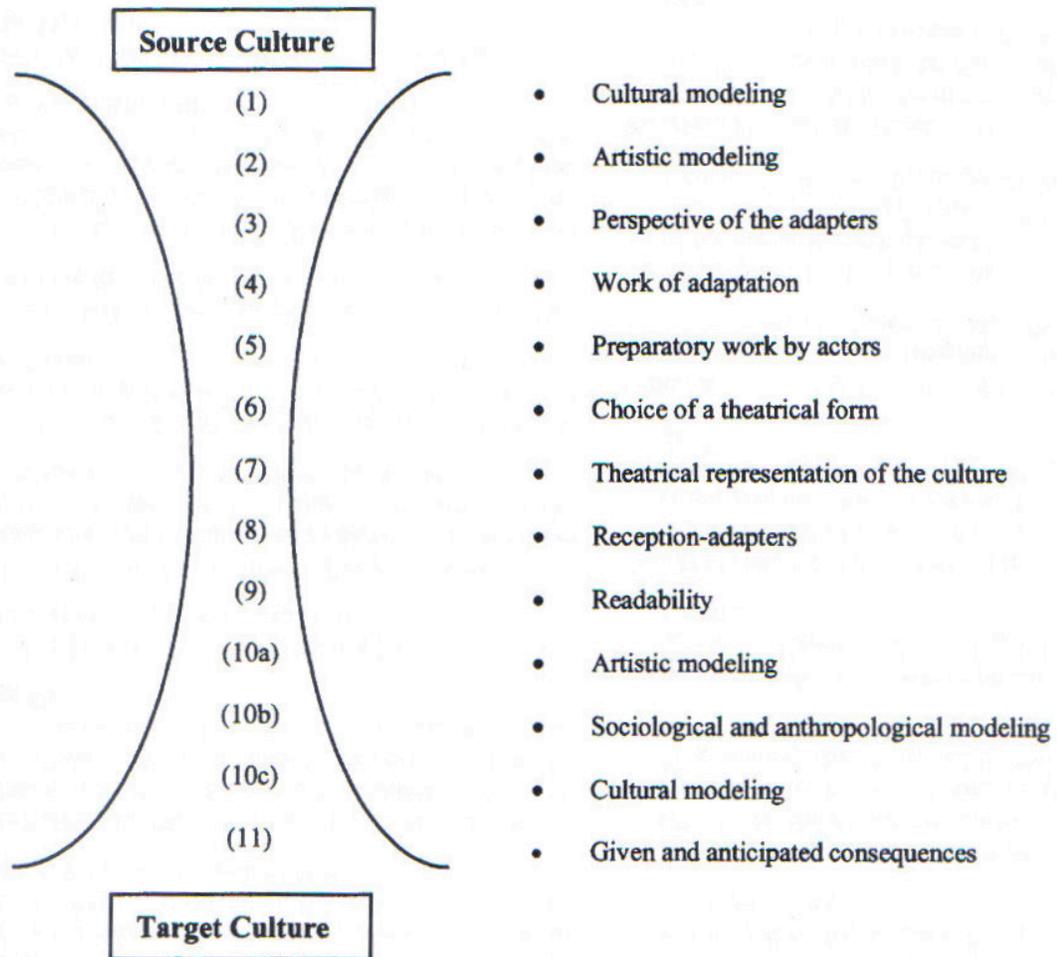


Figure 5. Pavis' hourglass model. Image taken from *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, page 4.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

According to Pavis, the word “hourglass” is used to describe how one culture goes through a filter and then reaches a target audience:

In the upper bowl is the foreign culture, the source culture, which is more or less codified and solidified in diverse anthropological, sociocultural or artistic modelizations. In order to reach us, this culture must pass through a narrow neck. If the grains of culture or their conglomerate are sufficiently fine, they will flow through without any trouble, however slowly, into the lower bowl, that of the target culture, from which point we observe this slow flow. The grains will rearrange themselves in a way which appears random, but which is partly regulated by their passage through some dozen filters put in place by the target culture and the observer.⁷⁸

The hourglass model shows a one-way flow from the non-Western to the Western (or Eurocentric) culture and vice versa. Since it is a one-way flow, it does not display the simultaneous negotiation and dynamic process between the exchanges. Pavis tries to solve this problem as he suggests that “it is turned upside-down as soon as the users of a foreign culture ask themselves how they can communicate their own culture to another target culture,” but the turning upside-down is still a one-way flow and the exchange does not happen simultaneously.⁷⁹ Despite the limits of a one-way flow, the hourglass has two other possible blind spots. First, as Pavis describes, if the hourglass is like a mill, then the hourglass essentially crushes and blends the elements from the source culture and drops them into the target culture, destroying every specificity. Second, if the hourglass is like a funnel, then the elements from the source culture would pass through the funnel without being reshaped or appropriated.

However, in CTW’s case, because Fong and Kaplin worked as a team, the exchange happens simultaneously instead of flowing one way and the interactions are mutual. This suggests the need for me to turn to yet another theoretical model. To that

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

end, Lo and Gilbert propose a modified model of Pavis’s hourglass in order to recognize both the source culture and target (Western) audience as “partners.”⁸⁰ This model is useful to my analysis because it demonstrates how the flow is not one-way

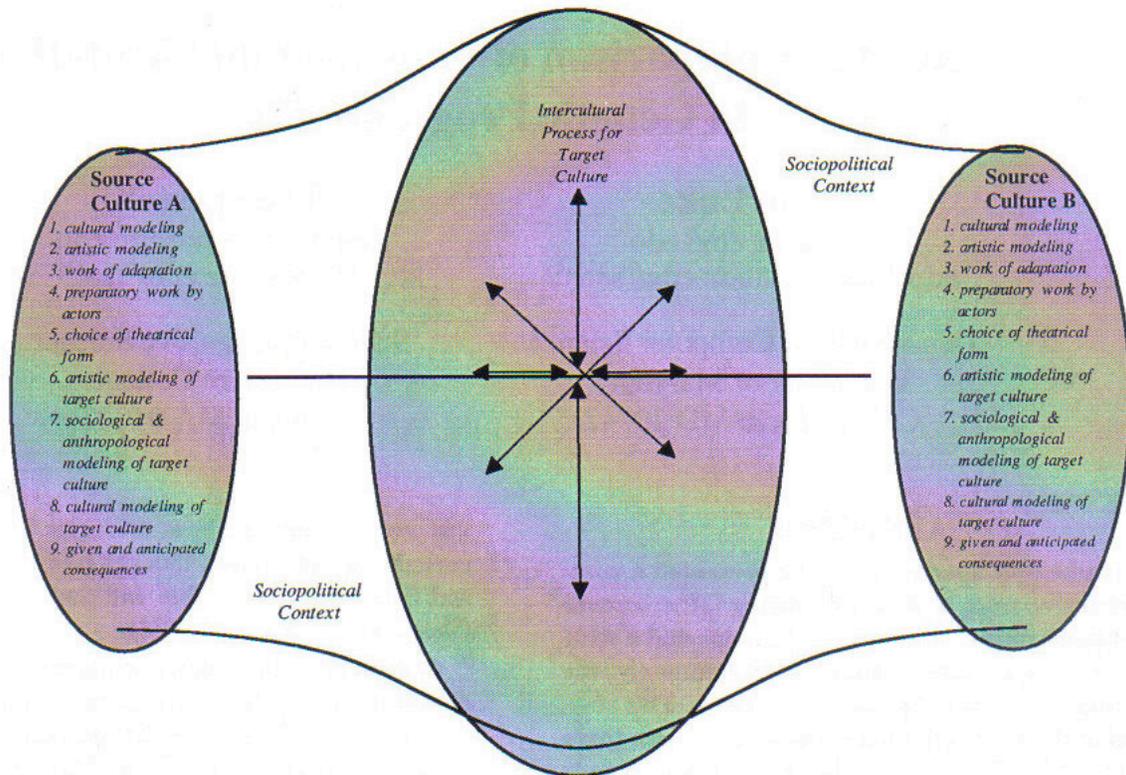


Figure 6. Lo and Gilbert’s modified model. Image taken from *Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis*, page 45.

but two-ways. In CTW’s case, the source culture A is the Chinese culture (as represented by the White Snake folk tale, the traditional Kun opera, etc.), and the source culture B is the American source (as represented by Kapin and the American puppeteers and their contributions for the production). In Lo and Gilbert’s model, there is a continuum, as indicated in figure 6., that allows for the production to “lean

⁸⁰ Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz, *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, And Performance* (University Of Delaware Press, 2005): 155.

more” to one side than the other. I argue that CTW’s production, *The Legend of White Snake*, moves along on the continuum and is positioned closer towards the Chinese source culture. While Chinese source culture offers elements such as the White Snake folk tale and traditional Kun opera that are clear cultural referents, the American source culture only has Kaplin and a few American puppeteers as cultural representatives to contribute to the production. It seems that the Chinese source culture dominates more in the production and there is an “imbalance” rather than “balance” between the two source cultures in this production.

Instead of going through Lo and Gilbert’s model by each filter, I will focus on the aspects of their theoretical model which reflect the processes of “transformation” and “bridging” in CTW’s production of *The Legend of White Snake*. This focus requires that I examine the position of the creators and their roles in the shaping of the production, and the ways in which their choices potentially affect audience interpretation of the production.

Fong and Kaplin: The Adapters and Their Work

First, to analyze CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* as an intercultural performance, one has to recognize the source cultures and the adapters. To adapt a Chinese folk tale into a Kun opera production that meets CTW’s ideals, CTW could not simply translate the text into English because it had to consider other cultural factors. To consider the process of the adapters we first need to know that the term “adapter” does not only equate to “linguistic translator” but rather refers to a broad

range of people and circumstances that influence a production. Pavis defines the term as following:

...the adapter can be the linguistic translator of the text as well as the director, designer, actor, or all those who have a mediating function, adapting, transforming, modifying, borrowing, appropriating source text and culture for a target culture and audience. All these artists necessarily adapt the source culture to the target culture, i.e. mediate or act as a bridge between two poles.⁸¹

Using Lo and Gilbert's model, there should be two source cultures that influence the production simultaneously. In CTW's case, the two source cultures are the Chinese culture and the American culture, represented by Fong and Kaplin, respectively.

Upon reading CTW's statement that said its work aims to "bridge Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics and forms" and its casts feature Chinese, Taiwanese, and American performers, it led me to the idea that the artistic directors of CTW would experiment with the Kun opera performers and the shadow puppeteers during the rehearsal process so that the art forms would interact and build upon each other in performance. I thought, for example, that the traditional Kun opera performing artists may try to perform an untraditional text using their codified actions (thereby transforming the traditional performing art conventions) or, perhaps, that the puppeteers would directly interact with the opera artists. However, this was not the case at all.

From my observation of the UMD production and the Pace University production, there were minimal interactions between the Kun opera performers and the artistic directors, the Kun opera performers and the puppeteers, and the puppeteers and the artistic directors. Moreover, when it became apparent that the Chinese and the

⁸¹ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 191.

American performers had different concepts of theatre or different ideas about theatrical strategy, there was no attempt to work through these misunderstandings and they remained unresolved. For example, in the UMD production, one of the Chinese performers who played Sheng⁸² for the production did not speak English and therefore could not read the English scripts to know CTW's version. Instead of communicating or collaborating with him to familiarize with the production, the artistic directors used a strategy to instruct him to play. They made several small flags and each represented a "mood." When Kaplin held the red flag, the Chinese Sheng player played a melody that was in angry mood, and the blue for tranquil mood, and so on. To be sure, the interactions between the Kun opera performers, puppeteers, and the artistic directors were one-way—that only the artistic directors were giving instructions to the performers.

In the case of CTW, the most important "adapters" in the project are the artistic directors, Kung-Yu Fong and Stephen Kaplin, since they are they only two artists that were empowered to shape and inform *The Legend of White Snake*. This makes them the representatives of source cultures since other performers could not offer their opinions. In other words, Lo and Gilbert's two-way model only works between the representatives of source cultures, Fong and Kaplin. As the "adapters," they were charged to consider the readability of their adaptation since the readability of the piece plays an important part in intercultural productions: if the performance is not "readable" it loses its meaning among the spectators. Ideally, in order to truly achieve their goal to "bridge" cultures through their art, they should have kept a balance between the two source cultures, making the work "readable" to both source cultures.

⁸² A traditional Chinese musical instrument.

Nevertheless, Fong and Kaplin did not manage to maintain the balance: the production moved towards the Chinese culture. Instead of integrating the elements from the American culture, which in this production was represented by Kapin and the American puppeteers, the production of *White Snake* is more like an appropriation of Asian performing arts for an American audience. This problem was also brought up by Kaplin in the interview in which he said that he hoped there could have been more rehearsals and experimentation with the Kun opera performers.⁸³ This shows that the two cultural representatives had different concepts for this production, and when Kaplin wanted to experiment more based on his concepts during the rehearsal process, his idea was impeded and could not realize due to the limited time, space, and budget.⁸⁴ What Fong and Kaplin did manage to do, however, was to adapt some particular Chinese culture references and traditions for an American audience. They took a traditional Chinese story and translated it into English. They also took traditional Chinese views of gender and attempted to modernize the gender bias in the ancient Chinese folk tale. In terms of dramatic form, CTW used a combination of English narration, shadow puppetry, and Kun opera conventions to assist in overcoming the language barrier as well as in an effort to portray traditional elements of the Kun opera art form

It should also be noted that while Kaplin could be perceived as the representative of the American source culture, he was also influenced by the Chinese source culture. For example, in order to make the *White Snake* story appealing to an American

⁸³ Stephen Kaplin, interview by author, 30 December 2009, Queens, NY, MP3 recording.

⁸⁴ According to Fong, CTW relies on governmental grants or private donations, especially the grants from New York State Council on the Arts. Using these grants to offer free performances makes CTW tight on resources and further influence the time, space, and budget they could use on one production. Kung-Yu Fong, interview by author, 30 December 2009, Queens, NY, MP3 recording.

audience, Fong and Kaplin first translated and then retold the story. One of the most obvious challenges is the translation of Chinese terms is the need to decide whether or not to keep the original Chinese names and details or to translate them by replacing them with English equivalents. For example, the name of the “magical mushroom” mentioned in the scripts, “靈芝” (*lin zhi*), went through various filters as Fong and Kaplin first translated it into English as “a magical mushroom” but then changed it back to the original Chinese name. Their initial intention was to help the American audience understand the plot using a literal translation: a *ganoderma lucidum* (the scientific name of 靈芝) that contains magic power so that it is a “magic mushroom.” But later, CTW decided that they should not grind the source materials into too small pieces—that “靈芝” loses its original tone and meaning when it is translated too literally. Therefore, CTW decided to use the original name and pronunciation, thereby letting the source element pass through filters without being changed.

This example shows that Kaplin could also be seen as representative of the Chinese source culture more than the representative of American source culture (or target audience), which seems to contradict CTW’s goal of “bridging.” At the beginning when he worked with Fong, Kaplin did not know the meaning and term of “靈芝” and he translated the term into English; after he gradually understood and became familiar with the term, he chose to change the translation back to the original name and use a visual prop (a giant mushroom prop) as an aid for explanation. In other words, CTW did not achieve the balance but rather made slight modifications for the American audience. Kaplin’s proximity to the work and to Chinese culture may not have always been helpful when he attempted to make things more “readable”

to an American audience who was far less familiar with Chinese culture and language.

Thus, as one might suspect, the perspective of adapters shapes the actual work. Once the thought-process behind the work is unveiled, we can move to see how the adapters apply their theories to their project. Conflicting with their own statement, it seems that what Fong and Kaplin strived to achieve is to preserve and promote Kun opera—a Chinese art form that they think to be “beautiful”—and adapt it for the American audience.⁸⁵ In order to accomplish this goal, Fong and Kaplin had to consider the level of readability of their final product so that the American audience could understand their performance, as well maintain a particular readability that presents the Chinese culture they want to preserve. In the following discussion, I will then examine how CTW chose and employed the mixed form of the production according to their ideals.

⁸⁵ Kung-Yu Fong, rehearsal, April 26, 2009, UMD.

First, one of the main examples of hybridity in CTW's production was created by the production's use of Kun opera. Kun opera is easily understood as a Chinese art form. The cultural referent is clear. The traditional Kun opera, as previously mentioned, does not use an elaborate and realistic style of settings; rather, it uses conventional ones. By not utilizing the "one table and two chairs" typically used in Kun opera, CTW minimizes the setting to almost nothing (if not counting the backdrop for shadow puppetry). Although it gives the artists more room to perform their conventions of acting and movement, it eliminates the codification of Kun opera's traditional setting. While CTW uses traditional Kun opera costumes and



Figure 7. CTW's Kun opera performers were in the traditional style of Kun opera costumes and performed one of the martial art conventions. Photographed by Long Long Wang.

makeups the lack of the traditional set impairs an American audience's full understanding of the art form and its traditions. As described in the introduction, Kun opera is a highly conventional art and the performers need long-term training to be

professionals which makes the Kun opera performer's training very important. It is for this reason that CTW works with a group of professional Chinese Kun opera performers who know the codification of Kun opera and were trained long ago in China or Taiwan.⁸⁶ When CTW chooses to keep the form of Kun opera but let the shadow sequences tell the basic storyline, this arrangement shortens the amount of rehearsals because there is not as much storyline for the Kun opera performers to enact on stage. During the production rehearsals at the University of Maryland, College Park and Pace University, the Kun opera performers attended fewer sessions than the puppeteers, and when they did attend, they used the rehearsal time to practice the theatrical conventions. The only extra information they requested during the rehearsals was the size of the performing space. Because there were many martial arts displays in the Kun opera scenes of *The Legend of White Snake*, the Kun opera performers (the Wu Dan roles and the Wu Sheng roles who were to perform the martial arts) wanted to know the range and type of performance space in order to practice their movement and choreography. Therefore, it shows that there was minimal communication between the groups of the Kun opera performers and puppeteers and that the Kun opera performers just repeatedly (and mechanically) performed the Kun opera conventions they already knew.

Another important example of *The Legend of White Snake*'s hybrid production is the use of shadow puppetry. There were two kinds of shadow puppetry in CTW's production. As mentioned earlier, the first kind is the traditional Chinese shadow puppetry which is sometimes used in their production. Most of the Chinese shadow

⁸⁶ The performing conventions include singing, dancing, movement, and also the martial arts for the Wu Sheng.

puppets are made of colored and translucent parchment and the manipulation of the traditional Chinese shadow figures is explained by scholar Fan Pen Li Chen in detail in *Chinese Shadow Theatre*:

...all the figures have detachable heads that are filed in folders during storage. Before a performance the heads to be used for the play are attached to appropriate bodies and hung on two lines perpendicular to the sides of the screen along the backstage area. The limbs and body of the individual figures are articulated. A flexible central rod is attached to the collar of the shadow figure and two others to each of the hands. For maximum articulation, the majority of the traditional figures consist of two separate pieces of parchment for the body, two each for the arms and legs, and separate pieces for the hand...the shadow master manipulates these figures behind a paper or cloth screen illuminated by oil lamp or electrical lights, accompanied invariably by an orchestra.⁸⁷

Fan Pen Li Chen also points out that the Chinese shadow puppetry represents the “aspects of Chinese culture that are once ancient and pervasive among the non-elite silent majority.”⁸⁸ As Fan Pen Li Chen explains,

the role of shadow theatre in shaping messages transmitted through the culture cuts across regional and class lines. Hence, the “popular” in popular culture vis-à-vis the shadow theatre means “common” and “widespread.” Although it represented the “little” or “folk” tradition (versus the “great” or “elite tradition”) and its audiences constituted mainly illiterate people...⁸⁹

This shows that the traditional Chinese shadow puppetry originally had a strong connection to the illiterate in ancient Chinese society. Just as it was effective for communicating in the past, the benefit of using shadow puppetry is that the visual helps transmit and enhance meaning. For example, when Kaplin introduces Blue Snake in the of *The Legend of White Snake*'s prologue, the puppeteer manipulates the traditional Chinese shadow puppet of Blue Snake to indicate that Blue Snake is a

⁸⁷ Fan Pen Li Chen, *Chinese Shadow Theatre* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

martial arts figure. In the narration, it said that Blue Snake has “two sharp swords,” so the shadow puppet of Blue Snake holds two swords in its hands, animating the description.

The second kind of shadow puppetry in *The Legend of White Snake* (the projector shadow puppetry), is based on traditional shadow puppetry. This projection shadow puppetry plays a particularly important role in CTW’s production of *White*

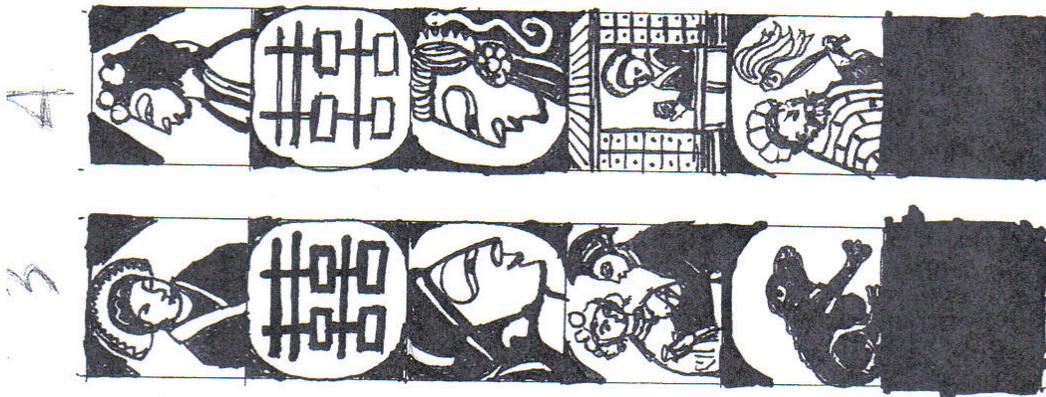


Figure 8. Models of CTW’s projection shadow puppets. This particular series of puppets was used in the shadow sequence 2. The puppeteer put each transparent plate on the projection and cast a shadow on the screen. Taken from CTW’s scripts of *The Legend of White Snake*.

Snake because almost all the plot is told through the performance of shadow puppetry along with the English narration. It is a fusion of traditional Chinese shadow puppetry and modern techniques. As figure 11 shows, the source and character models of the projector shadow puppets created by Kaplin were inspired by traditional Chinese shadow puppets. The shadow puppetry screen (a white cloth) serves as the backdrop of the stage. The puppets are carved on transparent plates and then their images are shot on the screen by two projectors. When the narration begins the puppeteers change plates accordingly. Stephen Kaplin described this projection shadow puppetry

as a “primitive powerpoint” during the first rehearsal for the Maryland Day performance.

Given the effect of light (a basic element of shadow puppetry), the images zoom in and out and fade in and out. This effect supports CTW’s goal in several ways. The continuous animation-like effect helps the American audience understand an ancient and unfamiliar folk tale by visually transmitting content and meaning. Moreover, while the animation-like shadow sequences shows the story visually, the English narration tells the story audibly, so the audience may further have the opportunity to associate and understand the Kun opera conventions in relation to the story and its characters. Second, the blending in and out effect is an imagistic “blending” that supports both CTW and the White Snake’s ideas of merging and/or transformation visually, which shows how *The Legend of White Snake*’s form attempts to support its content.

When CTW preserved most of the Kun opera and shortened the training and rehearsing time, the theatre company chose to use the animation/projection “puppetry” so the puppeteers did not have to be experienced or mastered in shadow puppetry skills. To perform this kind of shadow puppetry, the most difficult and time-consuming work is the design and carving completed by Kaplin. All the puppeteers have to do is learn to change the plates according to cues given by Kaplin. Briefly, the new technique CTW uses simplifies the training process of puppeteers. This enables CTW to find people in the United States to be their puppeteers so they do not have to bring professional shadow puppeteers from China or Taiwan to the United States. The arrangement makes the Kun opera scenes and the shadow sequences separate like a

collage instead of their ideal “blending.” The storyline was told by the shadow sequences and the Kun opera scenes were inserted between each shadow sequence. This mechanism allows all the performers to perform immediately with limited sources, but this also contradicts with their idea of “bridging Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics” in terms of the performers’ experience and their own expectation of experimenting with the forms. CTW’s original intention was to create an intercultural theatre, but one of the important elements—the personal interactions and communication between Eastern and Western artists—was eliminated from their process. While most theatre ensembles would expect to experience many discussions or even arguments during the rehearsal process, the rehearsal process for CTW’s *The Legend of White Snake* did not allow for that type of interaction. The rehearsals became a steady space where performers worked like they were on an assembly line.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

According to CTW's statement on the official website, it claims that it intends to "bridge Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics and forms," but after my examination on scripts, performing styles, and my experience as a performer in their production of *The Legend of White Snake*, I think that CTW did not achieve their goal to create intercultural performance by "bridging" cultures. Referring to Schechner and Lo and Gilbert's definitions of "intercultural performance," there must be elements from two source cultures that are "mixed but not successfully fused" and/or that these elements can be "contradicting." However, in CTW's case, the Chinese source culture was too dominant and the American source culture was very minimal. The representatives of American culture—Kaplin and the American puppeteers—could not question the concepts of Chinese culture. In the end, the American puppeteers remained silent in the rehearsal process and Kaplin gradually absorbed the Chinese culture and became part of it. The American artists did not contribute significant elements from American culture to mix or contradict with the Chinese culture. While CTW states to "bridge Eastern and Western theatrical aesthetics and forms," its performance did not allow for that kind of intercultural work—there was no room for contradiction or clashing in terms of discussion and conceptual exchanges between the ensemble members. The production was strongly influenced by Fong's own ideology of preserving Kun opera and turned out more like an appropriated Kun opera production for the American audience, in which most elements of the traditional Kun opera were preserved and the English narration and

shadow puppetry were used to assist the American audience to understand the Kun opera performing conventions.

As CTW failed to achieve a balance between the Chinese culture and the American culture, its arrangement made their performance seem like a collage. The way CTW presents each element creates the kind of mechanism, and this kind of mechanism, including the preservation of traditional Kun opera and animation-like shadow puppetry, can barely be seen as a “blending.” I would not consider CTW’s “bridging” an example of intercultural theatre but rather an appropriation of the traditional Kun opera, one that presents “a functional transformation.” To term their transformation “functional” does not mean that they achieved their goals effectively, but rather it suggests that they created a workable arrangement, especially considering that CTW is a non-profit organization with limited resources. This arrangement allowed them to quickly find people to perform as puppeteers in productions and let the Kun opera performers have day jobs while rehearsing and performing at nights. Since CTW works on a tight budget, the “functional transformation” may not fully realize CTW’s goals to preserve and promote Kun opera in the U.S., but it does offer Fong and Kaplin the opportunity to create a *greater awareness* of Kun opera in the United States. In addition, CTW tries to show “aspects of the contemporary Chinese experience from slowly changing gender roles,” but from my analysis of the play scripts, it shows that CTW wrestled with the idea but failed to achieve it. In CTW’s version, the female characters such as White Snake and Blue Snake, were given more power than men at the beginning, but in the end, White Snake was betrayed, punished, and imprisoned. The patriarchal thinking

still had its strong influence in CTW's version and seems to warn women that men are unsurpassable. This version did not reflect the changing gender roles in Chinese society.

Furthermore, if we simply consider CTW's goal to teach American audiences about Kun opera, we are confronted with the fact that their presentation of *The Legend of White Snake* may confuse rather than educate American audiences. Without prior knowledge of Kun opera, CTW's American audience may not recognize the difference between what is traditional Kun opera versus what is contemporary and experimental in CTW's production. The content and form are consistent in presenting an ancient and mythical China, but despite the promotion on their poster, CTW did not explain that all the elements—the Kun opera, the two kinds of shadow puppetry, and even their contemporary adaptation of White Snake folk tale—belong to distinct art forms. The American audience might well regard the hybrid performance as how the traditional Kun opera operates. Moreover, the male-biased perspective CTW presented in *The Legend of White Snake* might mislead the American audience to think that the story depicted the present Chinese society.

Overall, CTW failed to achieve their goal to “bridge” cultural understanding through *The Legend of White Snake*. If the two artistic directors, Fong and Kaplin, could achieve a balance when exchanging cultural elements, the production of White Snake could be closer to their ideal. In addition, if they could change their assembly line style of rehearsals and performances the production could also be more intercultural in terms of the performers' experience. However, in order to achieve this, CTW needs to re-evaluate their intention to preserve the traditional Kun opera,

or re-consider to what extent they can preserve the elements of traditional Kun opera if they are simultaneously experimenting with other theatrical strategies and styles.

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